

Sarah Palin's Non-Candidacy Candidacy

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Since the tragic events in Tucson, Sarah Palin has once again been at the center of American politics. An image on her website, which included a map of the US with crosshairs over Gabrielle Gifford's congressional district as well as several others that Palin was targeting for the midterm election was viewed by some of Palin's critics as evidence that the former Alaska governor, who has certainly been prone to aggressive and heated rhetoric and not afraid of violent imagery and language, was somehow in some way partially responsible for the shooting in Tucson. This interpretation proved somewhat presumptive as in the days following the shooting, it became increasingly clear that Jared Lee Loughner, the man who shot Gifford and the others, was a mentally unstable man without any cohesive political views. Therefore, while it was legitimate to express concern over Palin's rhetoric, the direct link between her and Loughner did not exist.

After being thrust into the middle of these events, presumably against her will, Palin stumbled badly. She gave a major speech where, rather than simply express her sorrow regarding the horrible events, she sought to portray herself as the victim, not of a crazed assassin, but of the media and the left of center punditry. Palin even went as far as to use the term "blood libel" to describe what has happening to her. This indicated that Palin saw some kind of equivalency between making false accusations about a group of people that contributed to centuries of hatred, violence and pogroms towards that group leading eventually to genocide, and accusing somebody of contributing to a violent climate simply because she irresponsibly uses violent language and places a map on her website with crosshairs over the murder victims congressional district. Palin would probably have been perceived as a victim of an unfair rush to judgment, at least by some, had she been able to at least temporarily curb her strong sense of victimhood. Instead, she made this a major theme of her first speech after the shootings.

At a time when President Obama was able to eloquently demonstrate his understanding of the tragedy and what it means to America by making perhaps the most thoughtful and sensitive speech of his presidency, Palin flubbed the opportunity, demonstrating not sensitivity but her never ending need for attention and sympathy. For most politicians in Palin's position, the contrast between her speech and Obama's speech would be very damaging, revealing how her temperament is not well-suited for national office, and potentially derailing talk of a presidential campaign.

Palin, however, lives in a different political world than most politicians even within her party, primarily because she has a different set of incentives and motivations. While there

is reason to believe that Palin has interest in the presidency, she does not treat it as not a quest that should be pursued rationally and systematically, as might be the case for Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee and other possible Republican candidates for 2012. It seems that, for Palin, the presidency is something that she will pursue if it makes sense, but she will not permit that pursuit to distract from her broader agenda of generating as much money and attention for herself as possible.

Ironically, this makes Palin a more powerful and, inevitably, more dangerous political force. Unburdened by the risk aversion which dominates the decision making of most politicians from both major parties, Palin faces no political consequences for saying and doing the outrageous. While other politicians have to be careful about saying something that could hurt them in a future election campaign, Palin has no such concern because she has already said so much that would have destroyed most politicians. While other people exploring a presidential campaign worry about getting their facts wrong or making a gaffe, Palin has created a situation where her ignorance has become her biggest strength and that all knowledge, particularly when derived from education, is suspect. This is a tremendous political asset for somebody who knows as little about the world as Palin does.

Palin is also accountable to nobody other than perhaps the producers at Fox who seem to have a pretty high tolerance for bizarre and extremist right-wing assertions. Like Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh and others, Palin has a powerful media presence, but unlike them she can always explore moving back into politics when it suits her. Her words, therefore, cannot be viewed entirely as those of an entertainer in it for the money like, for example, Glenn Beck, even though that is what Palin increasingly looks like. Palin may or may not run for president, but by not letting that possibility dictate her choices now she has made herself wealthier, more powerful and perhaps ultimately a stronger, if more frightening, presidential candidate.